



THE W. HAYWOOD BURNS INSTITUTE

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Fundamentals of Engaging Community in Detention and Equity Reform

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

The W. Haywood Burns Institute for Juvenile Justice Fairness and Equity (BI) was founded in 2002. The BI works to improve the life outcomes of poor youth and youth of color in public child serving systems. The BI's core values require the participation of community representatives living in neighborhoods which are high contributors to the justice system and providing them with information, guidance and tools to more ably participate in disparities reduction efforts.

The BI believes that community participation improves all systems by increasing transparency, cultural integrity and power sharing. We have found that a well-informed, data driven and strategically guided group of stakeholder's has the best potential to achieve positive results regarding disparities. To our knowledge, we are the only organization in the country that works routinely at all three levels – community members, local organizations and system decision makers.

The notion of involving community members in best practices for young people in trouble with the law has deep historical roots. Indeed, the juvenile justice system itself was formed by a prominent community member, Jane Addams. Similarly, John Augustus, the founder of probation services was a shoemaker from the community whose ideas are a bedrock of the juvenile justice system. The BI believes that addressing the dynamics of racial and ethnic disparities (RED) today will again require the involvement of community members who possess an intimate knowledge and connection to the neighborhoods contributing most to detention.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Low Hanging Fruit: Easy to Reach, Partial Impact on RED

Detention reform work often begins with the “low hanging fruit” as many jurisdictions identify simple policy and practice changes that lead to tangible detention reductions. However, experience has shown that while these reforms initially achieve significant reductions in the use of secure detention for all youth, there often is limited impact on the overrepresentation of youth of color.

Community and System Partnership is Key

A review of the history of the juvenile justice system demonstrates that system stakeholders working in isolation without engaging community are not in the best or strongest position to achieve equity for youth of color. System stakeholders will need to push past their comfort zones to establish a transparent environment that is inclusive of community participation. Similarly, community stakeholders alone cannot address RED on their own or with limited or no participation from system stakeholders. There must be a meaningful partnership between the community and system stakeholders that is rooted in trust and driven by data which is central to the detention reform process.

This is NOT a Check the Box Process

Community engagement is not a mechanical exercise, but rather a comprehensive and thoughtful skill-based approach. As with any sustainable change, significant efforts must be made to go beyond token efforts at community engagement. Both system and community stakeholders should be prepared to go outside their comfort zones in order to establish a productive partnership.

FINDING VALUE: TESTIMONY FROM A SYSTEM STAKEHOLDER

Frank Hosch former Ramsey County (MN) Juvenile Probation Chief on community engagement. *“ I had to learn to listen more to what the community wants. I’ve had to learn to be in a dialog about what’s really needed, to learn how to let go of the control, listen, talk and make changes that reflect what the community tells us.”* Under his leadership the foundational pieces of detention and equity reform were implemented leading to safely reducing the average daily population (ADP) of pre-adjudicated youth in secure detention by 67%; most notably a 53% reduction in the ADP of youth of color. While not the most traditional path to equity reform, Frank joined in community engagement sessions with the Burns Institute’s Community Justice Network for Youth. Similarly, his replacement Michael Belton has embraced inclusion of community members as an essential element of sustained disparities reduction.

STEPS TO GETTING STARTED

Establish Purpose for Community Engagement

Jurisdictions must engage in a conversation about why stakeholders want or need to engage the community from target geographical areas contributing most to RED.

Identify System Needs

Begin with your target offenses and key decision points as identified by the data coupled with a demographic analysis focused on race, ethnicity and geography. Use this information to reach out to community members and request support toward the RED reduction effort.

Strategic Outreach to Targeted Community

Use the data to identify the geographic areas or neighborhoods contributing to RED and then conduct an analysis of those areas to create a community outreach list. Include community and faith based leaders, advocates as well as community based organizations working with at risk youth.

Establish Contacts and Key Relationships

Use the outreach list to build a landscape of the target community by establishing contacts and building relationships with key community stakeholders. Make sure to clearly explain your jurisdiction's purpose for engaging community, as this will build trust and credibility. Identify individuals with an interest in participating as stakeholders in the RED reduction effort.

Convene Meeting of System and Community Stakeholders

System stakeholders should share the system's needs and express interest in partnering with the community, as well as explain where the jurisdiction is at within the detention reform process. If this is your jurisdiction's first effort at community engagement be prepared to explain why system stakeholders have not reached out to the community as of yet, remember honesty is best as it builds a foundation of trust.

Develop A Work Plan to Reduce RED in Partnership with Community Stakeholders

Once the community stakeholders have been oriented to the process, begin the process of developing a work plan based on the target offenses identified through the data driven approach. This plan should explore opportunities for community-based interventions that support system programming and lead to reductions in RED.

Conclusion

Reducing racial and ethnic disparities, while maintaining public safety, requires an intentional and strategic analysis of juvenile justice policies and practices. Informed partnerships of community members and juvenile justice decision-makers form a powerful combination for success.